

## The Gifts of A Mature Woman

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## The Gifts of *A Mature Woman*

Mark TIEDEMANN

Saiichi Maruya's second novel to be translated into English, *A Mature Woman*, packs a cornucopia of insight into contemporary Japanese society in its subtly comic pages. With the exception of Ryu Murakami, who gives the reader nearly as detailed descriptions of the world that is Japan today, albeit from a much more critical and negative viewpoint, Maruya is virtually alone among translated contemporary authors in his exhaustive exposé of society (Cameron). Other contemporary authors tend to concentrate on mysterious or fantastic plots (Haruki Murakami) or character development (Banana Yoshimoto), and they give the foreign reader little in the way of insight into the society in which the stories are set, if they even chose to set them in Japan at all (Amy Yamada). Indeed except for the references to some place names, some of these stories seem that they could be taking place almost anywhere in the modern world.

The novel is extraordinarily well crafted, "A first-rate piece of writing, penned with skill and style" (Oe). Even when he does stretch the bounds of believability, the senior editorial writer who can't write (Tsuboi) or the editorial blunder in letting Yumiko's controversial editorial get into print, Maruya goes to great lengths to set up a situation that is tenable. The reader of *A Mature Woman* is in for a treat, then, not only with Maruya's portrayal of Japan at the end of the century, but also with his ever-present sense of humor, his sympathetic and colorful treatment of characters, and his over-arching analysis of what he considers to be a basic tenet of Japanese society.

Such a richly constructed book could be said to be "about" many things. Maruya's portrayal of life in the newspaper company gives us glimpses of the staff's daily life, work ethics and interpersonal relationships. The story gives us a look at some of the back-scene workings of the Japanese government, especially the influence of donors on the political parties and the muscling of media companies. In the characters of Shibukawa and Miyake we are given the differing viewpoints and concerns of an academic and a bureaucrat. "Her voice is certainly a lot more expressive now than it was on her early records," one of the young men replied more critically. He was an assistant professor who taught Japanese history. . . 'Oh, I agree,' said Masaya Miyake, by way of endorsing both comments, as was appropriate for an up-and-coming bureaucrat in the Finance Ministry" (42). These two go as far as to engage in an argument over the Japanese

imperial expansion leading to World War II. The situation of company workers transferred away from home is brought up, and in Yumiko's apartment block the rules governing the keeping of pets illustrates the Japanese propensity to set up seemingly strict rules which are then bent and broken.

Even minute aspects of Japanese society and human relations are displayed such as Chie's use of, or decision not to use, honorific language when speaking to her elder suitors. "Although she was eight years younger than the two men, she sometimes spoke to them as their equal, as if she'd lost any sense of the difference in their ages over the years she'd known them" (63). The deference to guests that Japan is famous for is shown by Yumiko's mother setting out special house slippers at the door for her sister, and then when Miyake unknowingly wears them, the host's reluctance to say anything is an example of how "It is in the nature of Japanese society for everyone to try hard to avoid any subject that might cause the least offence" (61).

Considering the title of the book, and the fact that it is about a working woman, one might expect that the book is mainly concerned with the situation of women in the workplace in Japan. This is touched on. Yumiko's appointment to the editorial staff "meant breaking the unwritten rule that there should only be one female member of that team" (13), but the idea is not developed to any degree. Certainly, the fact that Yumiko is a woman plays no part in the central problem of the story, that of the land exchange.

Yumiko as a woman, however, is in the background as Maruya elucidates the attitudes of the men around her toward women and women's issues. The men at the editorial meeting let Yumiko go ahead with her article about abortion because it's "a subject they'd prefer not to think about" (83). The controversial editorial is helped through the editing process by the fact that many of them had gone home early so that they wouldn't be "in the awkward position of being asked to read Yumiko's editorial, aware they would be representing not only the male population of Japan but perhaps that of the world at large" (94). The deputy chief read the article "with great reluctance, even distaste, at the thought of all the unpleasant things she must have written," because "there had always been three things he particularly disliked: pumpkins, earthquakes and hysterical women; and what he particularly disliked about these last was their tendency to abuse the male sex" (94-5). The man in the makeup department viewed the article as "yet another piece of feminist propaganda" and "he read it with as much care as the devoted to the nagging of his wife and mother, concerned less with understanding than simply with putting up with it" (97).

Yumiko's position as a woman is also part of the picture as her colleague, Juzo Urano, takes a fancy to her. First, he misinterprets Yumiko's motivation in helping rewrite his articles to be a sign that she must be in love with him (39). As he persists in his advances, and she deftly deflects them, Yumiko does not seem to be harassed. Rather, she takes it as a compliment that he is attracted to her. When Urano helps her find out more about what is going on behind the scenes

concerning the land transfer, Yumiko feels “that she must still be quite attractive if a man could spend all day rushing around on her account” (130).

The role of men and women is further illuminated as Maruya includes discussions of arranged marriages and gives examples of some types of courtships--Urano's almost comic advances, and Takero Shibukawa and Masaya Miyake's gentlemanly competition for the heart of Yumiko's daughter, Chie. Secretive relationships are everywhere: Yumiko and her married boyfriend, the Professor Yokichi Toyosaki; the men at the newspaper who are reluctant to talk about abortion because “nearly all the men there had had the experience of getting a woman (their wives or other women) pregnant and having to arrange an abortion, and they felt it was just a matter of luck if anyone hadn't been in that position” (82); and Yumiko's great aunt, Masako Yanagi's former relationship with the Prime Minister when they were younger. The ancient Banzan Onuma plays the role of the sexual pervert with his groping of Chie, after she had been sent as “erotic bait” (156) to influence him to intervene on her mother's behalf.

These topics and many others are woven throughout the fabric of the book. The overriding theme, however, is the role of the exchange of gifts in Japanese society, and it is this that Maruya comes back to over and over again. His strategy here is similar to that in his other, much earlier novel, *Singular Rebellion*, where the author, against the backdrop of the large-scale student riots and social unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, gives numerous examples of how society is actually changed by the decisions of individual people, in matters concerning their ordinary lives, to reject the way things have been done in the past. In *A Mature Woman* the theme of the exchange of gifts runs literally from the first page, the newspaper defied “the government in the name of democracy only to support interventionism abroad in an attempt to stay on the right side of the military” (1), to the last, “the book gradually started to take shape in his mind. ‘I shall call it *The Indifferent Guide to Gift-Giving*.’ ‘*The Philosophy of Presents* would be better. Women perk up when they hear the word ‘present’” (322), with more than four dozen examples sprinkled throughout the text. We gain a convincing picture of how the exchange of gifts permeates all aspects of Japanese society from the small, the exchange of business cards, to the big, the wheels of government.

It is possible to look at Maruya's portrayal of the exchange of gifts from two angles. The first is the author's indication of the underlying sense of appropriateness of different kinds of gifts in different situations. The other is Maruya's analysis of where this emphasis on gift giving springs from and what it tells us about the character of Japanese society.

Given a myriad of examples of gifts, as we are in this book, it is inevitable that comparisons should arise—some gifts seem given with sincere generosity, others are begrudged only with the assurance of remuneration. These examples begin to spread themselves out along a

continuum, which on the one end represents genuinely selfless gifts given with only the benefit of the recipient in mind. On the other end are gifts given for no other reason than to receive something of equal or higher value in return. Off the scale, in the direction of the latter, are what Maruya calls commercial transactions. Although something is exchanged, these cannot be called gifts because what is to be exchanged is agreed upon beforehand and the exchange takes place simultaneously, both conditions eliminating the sense of goodwill. This is not to criticize commercial exchanges; they are the way of the modern world, but used as a point of comparison, they shed light on the special nature of the exchange of gifts. There appears a gray portion of the continuum as the nature of the gift approaches the nature of a commercial transaction. The more a person considers the value of the gift they expect to receive in turn, the more sleazy the act seems. It is more like a commercial transaction in the clothing of a gift.

The question arises as to whether Maruya is giving us a treatise on the intrinsic value of gifts. Certainly, it is clear that he abhors the greedy giver and prizes the sincere one. The Chief Secretary Sakakibara comes off in a very bad light as he blurs the distinction between gift and commerce by demanding that Professor Toyosaki give him something in “return” *before* he would agree to help Yumiko. Maruya comments, in his typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, as he has the professor think to himself that this is an exchange, but “a remarkably coercive form of it” (241). In addition, the problem with the exchange of land, the central exchange in the book, also illustrates unseemly intentions. What should have been a mere commercial exchange, the price and terms were agreed upon, was suddenly distorted into a self-serving “gift” when the exchange is held ransom to a punishment of the newspaper for offending a donator to the party’s coffers.

On the other hand, sincere gifts are praised. Toyosaki observes that Urano’s gift of a collar for Yumiko’s toy dog is indirect and therefore “perfectly sincere” (300). It is crucial to note that the resolution to the central problem of the story is made possible at the climax by Yumiko and the mysterious woman, who turns out to be the Prime Minister’s wife, making the most selfless acts of giving. Yumiko takes pity on another woman, obviously not with all her senses, who just wants to use some of her foundation makeup by giving the compact to her and subsequently a tube of lipstick. The woman leads Yumiko to her bedroom in order to give her a piece of jewelry, not for Yumiko, but for her daughter’s wedding. This simple, sincere exchange leads to the resolution of the problem whereas the other tactics they had employed that night, all also involving a type of exchange of varying degrees of decorum, failed.

However, Maruya does not harp on the worthiness of sincerity in exchanges over self interest. Certainly, it would be difficult to accurately establish how sincere a person really is or how much they are acting for their own benefit. More to the point, Maruya’s main intention is to show how intricately the custom of exchange is laced throughout Japanese society and what that

shows us about the society. “No doubt there are instances where it [gift giving] is done to excess, and excess should, of course, always be corrected, but that is still how we are” (239). Good intentions and bad, gifts are everywhere to be seen in Japanese life.

The initial analysis of the exchange of gifts is by an editorial advisor to the newspaper and expert on economics, Ichiro Anzai. He explains what sociologists call the “exchange theory” as “the idea of both doing well out of something. Give and take, if you like. Mutual interdependence.” It begins “with the idea that if someone receives a gift he feels obliged to give something back” (103). Toyosaki further elaborates on Anzai’s theory, saying that “gifts are usually the expression of goodwill,” and adding that an anthropologist has postulated that gift-giving is a ritual and “made the point that the soul of the giver is supposed to live in the gift” (112). Later he makes an analogy with the poetic form: “Just as the gods made their proclamations in poetry, so men petitioned the gods in poetic forms, too.”

Poems are for people who seek to be gods; prose is for ordinary people. The one is ancient; the other modern.

In the same way, the buying and selling of goods is a modern activity, practical and human, but the giving of gifts is ancient and incantatory—men playing the part of gods. When offerings are made to the gods, the person who makes the offering assumes the dignity of a pseudo-deity. In the middle ages, when a samurai made a vow of allegiance to his commander, both men in their own way behaved as gods; and the same still applies today when people exchange gifts, for a contract is made, the basis of which is a hallowing of the relations between people, a renewal and a reapprehension of its sacred nature. (320)

This idea could be observed in the functioning of any society. Maruya’s postulations as to why it is so prevalent in Japanese society are found scattered throughout the book. In Urano’s first editorial on the problem of politicians bribing their constituents, an exchange of money for votes, he notes “the fact that the bribe represents recognition that you are a member of a certain group. Refusing the bribe would be denying you own place in society, it would go against the concept of social obligation, and all the time spent building relationships” (21). Toyosaki adds, “Since ancient times the Japanese have lived in small, enclosed communities, in a state of constant anxiety about their relationships with their neighbors, obsessed with giving gifts in order to receive them, thus constantly renewing the links between each other” (238). This has resulted in “a nation in thrall to gift-giving. That is our national character” (239).

Toyosaki takes the analysis deep into Japanese society when he outlines his reasons for thinking the constitution should be abolished. One reason he thinks so is “for the Japanese people

to learn to think for themselves” based on their collective experiences rather than conforming to “what is or isn’t contained in this document (239). The other, stronger, reason is that the constitution does not, and essentially can not, refer to “the sense of reciprocity” that is “nothing like as strong as it is in Japan.” The society is carried along by the exchange of gifts as is Maruya’s story. The professor goes as far as to say that “Contemporary Japan is the empire, not of signs, but of gifts” (234). We can go as far, then, as to say that *A Mature Woman* is a book of gifts.

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